



Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education
Committee on Education and Labor
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*Testimony of Dr. Daniel Curry, Superintendent
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Good morning. My name is Dan Curry. I have served as superintendent of Lake Forest School District in Kent County, Delaware since the summer of 2003. I've been a school superintendent for 22 years, having served in that capacity for 15 years in my home state of West Virginia. Each district was uniquely different. Student enrollment ranged from 1500 to 15,000. One of those districts, Pocahontas County, is considered the most rural school district in the East with presently 1.3 students per square mile.

During my years as superintendent I have personally observed, and my districts have adjusted to, the change in philosophy from ESEA supporting and supplementing the work of the states and local school districts to ESEA mandating and directing the work of the school districts.

Lake Forest School district is a rural farm community around 12 miles south of Dover. We have around 3900 students in 166 square miles. Much of our land is dedicated to farming. We have huge fields planted mostly in wheat, soy and corn, but there are also plenty of fruits and vegetables. From 2004-2006 enrollment increased around 5% each year, and some of our fields gave way to sub-divisions.

The Lake Forest student population is 70% white, 25% African American and 5% all others. 43% of our children qualify for free or reduced priced meals at school. We have three primary schools with grades pre-K – 3, one intermediate for grades 4 - 5, one middle school for 6-8 and one high school.

First let me say that ESEA allocations have always been a godsend to rural school districts. It is the nature of rural areas to have high instances of poverty and low property values, leading to limited resources collected through property taxes. Central office staffs are generally small and they wear multiple hats. While working in the central office in Pocahontas County, over several years I managed almost every program. I even drove

bus on occasion. In some smaller school districts out west, they may share administrators or the principal might also be a teacher.

Rural superintendents I have talked to all agree that formula funding is the fairest means of distribution of ESEA funds. We fear that turning to competitive grants might leave rural districts at a disadvantage to compete. Most don't have expert grant writers nor do they have the resources to dedicate to them. Spending time and resources to go after grants we may not get is a poor use of resources especially during this economic downturn. It will do nothing but broaden the gap between the haves and the have not's.

I urge the committee to work to ensure that the formulas are also equitable for rural school districts. Specifically, the funding formulas should be based on percentages of poverty, not raw numbers. A poor student is a poor student no matter where they live and should not lose funding because they choose to live in a rural community.

The challenges facing rural schools are many. Recruiting and retaining teachers continues to be difficult for most rural school districts. Some districts have no choice but to maintain small schools with small enrollments. Geographical isolation and transportation challenges make that so. This leads to teachers who must teach multiple subjects and makes it almost impossible for them to meet the federal highly qualified definition. Finding the necessary additional college classes to eventually earn highly qualified status or making them take multiple assessments to meet this arbitrary definition is also a challenge for the same reason. First time teachers willing to agree to any assignment for a chance to teach, can find themselves committing to heavy load of multiple class preps while driving miles after work, several days a week to take the necessary classes.

In general, rural school districts face the same challenges when it comes to finding a sufficient candidate pool of qualified candidates for special education, math and science. The rural surroundings are a deterrent to some candidates. Though they may be willing to go anywhere when looking for work, many will leave after a time, seeking easier access to basic amenities like grocery stores, shopping centers and theaters. In addition, there is little focus by the teacher training programs to encourage candidates to take jobs in rural communities.

Finding school leaders is much the same. I was first given an opportunity to be a principal in rural Pocahontas County at age 24 because there was absolutely nobody in the district with the licensure. I was willing to make that move and it turned out to be a great decision in my career, but not everyone would enjoy living and working in such a rural area.

The rural school district student is like every other student in the United States, except he is accustomed to long rides on the school bus. She wants to do well. He'll respond to good teaching and high expectations in a climate that is supportive and challenging. I urge you to take steps to see that student progress is measured by growth in achievement and that progress for students in special education be in accordance with the educational goals of their IEP as opposed to the goals of the average student.

My district last year had the highest percentage of 8th grade students scoring proficient in Math – we ranked 1st in the state. Our 8th grade writing scores were 2nd and reading scores ranked 3rd. Yet, my middle school did not make AYP. Why? Because our special education students did not meet the general population target for proficiency. Our special education students are learning and making great strides; however, we must measure them based on what they are learning.

When creating the new accountability system, I would just like to remind the subcommittee to take into account the impact of small numbers of students. Rural schools districts are more likely to have small schools and small class sizes. When using student assessment data for accountability, or for tracking the progress of teachers, remember that the results of just one or two students can throw off the results.

In addition, remember that every time the federal government requests data on an issue, there is someone in a school district that is now responsible for tracking that new item. While never bad on its own, when these data points are added up they have a huge burden on rural schools which often lack administrative staff. Instead, principals and sometimes teachers are running around to meet these data requests. This is time away from critical instruction. Please remember the impact at the local level when these data requests are made.

I would also like to mention my support on behalf of rural superintendents for the Rural Education Achievement Program. While my district does not receive this funding directly, a lot of my colleagues do. This important funding stream is the only federally dedicated funding stream for rural schools across the country, both small and high poverty. It provided them with critical formula dollars to help overcome the gap in federal funding and their geographic isolation. This program has proven to be a huge success story in the over 6,000 district's nationwide that support it. I urge the subcommittee to adopt HR 2446, the REAP Reauthorization Act, introduced by Representatives Pomeroy, Graves and Hare. This important legislation will make the minor necessary updates to this very important program.

Finally, graduation rates. If we are to reach the administrations goal of “College and Career – Ready Students” we need to let go of the expectation that all children will get it done in 4 years. Those of us who have sent our children to college in recent times have learned that many will need more than 4 years to earn a degree. The college degree earned in 5 years or 6 years has the same value as that earned in 4. Why then must we, while acknowledging that all children can learn, but they learn at different rates, be prodded to get every child through high school in 4 years? Many would be better served with a 5 year plan. Many, due to challenges at home, would like to be supported to attend high school on a part-time basis. Any high school graduation, whether it takes 5 years, 6 years or whether it's earned after taking a year off, should be celebrated. A mandated 4 year graduation requirement works against all we know and understand of how children learn and develop.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today. I would be happy to take any questions.

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